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Ex-CIA agent decries image of cloak-and-dagger agency

By LEE GRAVES

David Atlee Phillips didn't have any problem telling his first four children he was working for the Central Intelligence Agency.

But when he broke the news to his 15-year-old daughter in 1975, her response was, "But that's dirty!"

"That, along with a lot of other things, got me on the path of leaving the CIA eight years early," said Phillips, who spent 25 years as an intelligence officer. Now he is an author and lecturer, and today at the Woman's Club he advocated a strong but responsible CIA.

Public perception of the agency, he indicated, is a real problem.

"It's true there are moments like in James Bond, sneaking around in dark alleys," he said during a telephone interview from his Maryland home. "But when young people ask me, I tell them that, in my personal opinion, the symbol for intelligence work should be changed from a cloak and dagger to a typewriter and a lot of 3-by-5 cards... It's not always exciting and glamorous.

"My most dangerous assignment was surviving the traffic in Rio de Janeiro when I was assigned there," he quipped.

Phillips' tour of duty spanned the terms of six presidents and took him throughout Latin America — Chile, Guatemala, Cuba, Santo Domingo, Brazil and Venezuela. He served as chief of station in the latter two countries and was made chief of Latin American and Caribbean Operations in 1973.

The role of spy was one he did not seek. Raised in Texas, he went to New York seeking his fortune as a playwright. World War II intervened, and Phillips spent part of the conflict in a German POW camp. After the war, he made enough money writing plays to buy a small newspaper in Chile, where he was approached in 1950 to gather intelligence on a part-time basis. Four years later he was a full-time agent.

He has seen history in the making — the fall of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala, the problems of Cuba under Batista and Fidel Castro's rise to power.

He also was intimate with developments in Chile, where the CIA suffered a black eye. That involvement, he said, can be viewed in three stages: the "debatable" period, lasting more than a decade, when the U.S. con-

stantly supported the Christian Democrats; the "indefensible" period, when President Nixon in 1970 sought to prevent the inauguration of Salvador Allende; and the "correct" period, when Allende was overthrown.

"When (he) was overthrown in 1973, the prime movers were Chileans," Phillips said.

While foreigners who work for U.S. agents lead dangerous lives, American intelligence officers abroad aren't as threatened. More of a concern is the ethical dilemma in the states.

"Even when you're stationed in the U.S. you must maintain that cover that's necessary for you to be effective abroad, indeed, if you are to survive.

"It made me think about personal morality and ethics when I had to lie to my neighbors, lie to my banker, all that sort of thing," he said.

"You have to live this double life. The whole family has to go through it." Alcoholism and a high divorce rate among agents result from these stresses, he said.

Still, he advocates a strong intelligence capability. There are dangers, he acknowledged, such as when domestic civil rights are violated.

"The danger is one we have to accept for that gain we get from it. We all have the responsibility to see that it's done the right way, and it hasn't always been done the right way in the past."

He has helped form the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, a 3,000-member organization working for legislation to improve the CIA. For six years they have been trying to get a law passed making it illegal for former agents to publicize the names of officers.

Striving to make the CIA more responsible is helping to improve its image, Phillips said. The negativism and outright hostility he once encountered on college campuses has been replaced by a spirit of dialogue and questions about how to get a job in the service. His next book gives advice on preparing for a career in intelligence work.

To illustrate the need for keeping an eye on the other guy, he tells the story about two American tourists who visit a zoo in Moscow where a bear and a lamb are kept in the same cage. The zookeeper explains that this illustrates peaceful coexistence is possible.

"He (the zookeeper) looks around to make sure he's not being overheard and says, 'Of course, we have to change the lamb every day.'"